



WORDS ELISABETH KING

MORE THAN EVER, EAT YOUR HEART OUT IN FIJI

THE GLOBAL success of Fiji Water, the favourite bottled water of celebs and Barack Obama, is a great metaphor for the island nation's development as a multi-level tourist destination. Now outselling Evian water in the US, the 14-year-old brand founded by David Gilmour, owner of the very exclusive Wakaya Club, ranks as the Mercedes-Benz of bottled waters. An aspirational thirst-quencher with strategic placements on popular TV shows such as *Sex and the City* and *Entourage* that has acted as something of a spearhead in lifting the sophistication of Fiji's image.

Fiji has long catered to two types of traveller - the mega-rich and trust fund babes (Bill and Melinda Gates honeymooned there) and families seeking affordable holidays on idyllic beaches and faraway islands. Australia is by far the major tourism market for Fiji, accounting for 46 per cent of international visitors, with the Kiwis and Americans filling

with the comment, "This is Paris standard." This was far from being a one-off; we enjoyed barista benchmark java at every single hotel we stayed at.

Many flights from Australia's east coast arrive late in the day or you have to get up at sparrow's for an early morning trip to the outer islands. There's no better place to flop in style than the Fiji Orchid. Only 15 minutes' drive from Nadi International Airport, the exclusive hideaway could be half an ocean away. The five star resort was once the island home of Raymond Burr, star of the long-running TV shows *Perry Mason* and *Ironside*. His former house has morphed into a gourmet restaurant, and six chic bures (each measuring 300 square metres) are hidden in the burly actor's orchid garden.

Owner Jenny Leewai Bourke and her brother Gordon, who also operate the luxury private island resort of Nukubati, have turned

all activities work up a keen appetite. You can opt for the main restaurant, a private dining experience in your bure or an outdoor beach venue overlooking Lesiacava Point, as we did. Many Fijian resorts grow their own vegetables, so to start I ordered a blue cheese and rocket salad, which could not have been fresher. While my fellow diners indulged in walu, a far tastier version of Spanish mackerel than our own, in various sauces. I ordered a polenta in a cheese and fresh vegetable sauce that would have received the thumbs-up in Italy. A flavourful mango sorbet finished off a perfect night under the stars. Visit www.fijiresort.com.

Out on nearby Hibiscus Highway stands Namale, the sort of luxury resort that shelters celebs when they need a rest or their lives have fallen apart. Owned by hyperactive motivational speaker Anthony Robbins, the resort is located on a natural coastal uplift so all the bures and villas are perched three

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second and third places. Increasingly, though, major international chains like Westin and InterContinental have set up shop in the Pacific's most popular tourism destination to offer plush surroundings, world-class cuisine and wines at prices that won't blow your budget out of the water. Many local resorts have followed suit, too. Can you afford a slice of paradise with all the trimmings. In Fiji, yes.

I hadn't been to Fiji for 10 years before a recent visit. Way back then, hotels and resorts served food that was good enough but didn't have anyone reaching for the superlatives. Wine choices, too, were limited to the products of canny wine companies who had almost exclusively sewn up Fiji's wine lists. The first sign that things had changed - a lot - appeared in the most unlikely of places: the airport. Desperate for a cup of coffee, we raced to a coffee bar to order some flat whites. Like most people, I don't expect much from airport cafes anywhere. But after the first sip, one of my colleagues got in before me

Raymond's Restaurant into a magnet for lovers of Pacific fusion cuisine. Our dinner started with a sort of Fijian mezze plate of kokoda (the Fijian version of raw fish salad), scallops wrapped in taro leaves and mussels in a spicy sauce. But the main course was the type of dish you dribble about - the freshest lobster piqued only with lemon and black pepper so the natural juices were left to pop in the mouth. For dessert, who would have thought that cassava cubes could taste that good in a caramel sauce? Go to www.fijiorchid.com.

The following day we headed to Savusavu. Or, more precisely, the Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Islands Resort, easily the finest upscale family resort in the South Pacific. Sure, there's a superb kids' club and activity program for the little ones, but the accommodation options range from a huge bure with a porch and hammock to super-luxury villas standing in splendid isolation at the far end of the property.

Days and early evenings can be spent snorkelling, diving, reef walking or lazing, but

to six metres above sea level for textbook 'views to die for'. The air-conditioned entertainment centre, aka the Kava Bowl, is a big boys' playground comprising a gym, simulated golf course and full-size bowling alley for whiling away any rainy days.

Dinner is served close to the immaculately manicured reception and the welcoming drink is Veuve Clicquot. Namale is a honeymoon hotspot so don't expect the restaurant to be overpopulated. We dined al fresco on a deck with expansive ocean views. Still testing the home-grown veggies, I plumped for a chicken caesar salad (top notch) and followed through with walu in a Pacific-style meuniere sauce, which went well with a Kiwi sav blanc. Wandering back to my mini-mansion with its own swimming pool, I was too relaxed to operate the drop-down movie screen. See www.namalefiji.com.

The InterContinental Resort Fiji opened about 18 months ago at Natadola on the Coral Coast, which claims to be Fiji's best

beach. The 640-hectare property includes a golf course designed by local sporting hero, golfer Vijay Singh. Dinner was a visual feast, too, in the resort's signature Navo restaurant with its spectacular views of the surrounding lagoon. To get to your table you have to run a food and beverage gauntlet, including a wine wall (top bottlings from around the world), a sashimi/sushi bar and fresh meat cuts so you know your steak will be thick and juicy. Most of my fellow diners went for the sushi because of a recently acquired addiction to Fijian seafood, but I couldn't move past the vegetarian special of the night - a tian of taro leaves and cassava. The impeccable presentation was matched by the taste. A nice touch following dessert was warm liquid chocolate in small shot glasses, instead of just another after-dinner truffle. Visit www.ichotelsgroup.com.

Many visitors begin or end a vacation or business trip to Fiji on Denarau Island, a 300-hectare spread of brochure-perfect beaches, top-class resorts, a marina and golf course located about half an hour's drive from Nadi Airport. Sheraton practically 'owns' a large chunk of the real estate with its own eponymous Westin and Sheraton Villas brands. We flaked out at the Westin, but dined at the Flying Fish restaurant at the Sheraton Fiji. The full island meal dream of a thatched bure, feet in the sand under the stars and food to match. There's a Pacific edge but 'sun cuisines' from around the world get a look-in with fusion dishes such as a French-style tart with feta. Nearly all of us chose the prawn curry, expertly spiced and again a showcase of Fiji's seafood. Walking back along the beach to the Westin, it was hard not to get teary as the staff sang *Isa Lei*, the Fijian farewell song, to every table of departing guests.

Getting there: V Australia, the only full service airline servicing Fiji, flies to Nadi six times a week from Sydney. Passengers from other capital cities can coordinate flights with Virgin Blue. For the best seasonal fares, visit www.vaustralia.com.au.

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